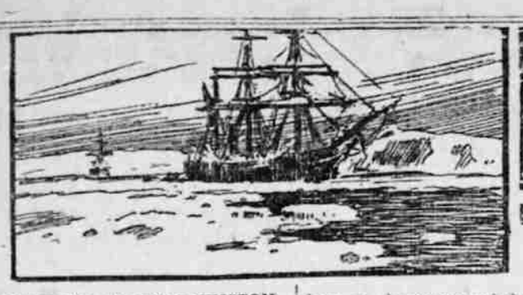


THRILLING LIVES

MORE WHALING STORIES

BY WILLIAM ALLEN JOHNSTON.

A glance backward over the history of Arctic whaling and exploration suggests vividly that there must be some wonderful magnetism about this great white world, some supernatural spell that it exercises over men and makes them insensible to the worst forms of suffering and death.

Its history is very black in places. Many of the most horrible chapters are locked up within its breast of ice and snow, but some have been told, and they read like the primal brutal strife of the stone age.

Seemingly the Arctic ocean has striven to isolate itself within a great, sweeping barrier of ice. Beyond my gates, it seems to say, you must not venture. Within is a shifting world of ice, swept beneath by treacherous, mighty currents and overhead with terrific gales, furious snow squalls, the ghastly shroud of sudden fog.

For years it has been a foregone conclusion that a goodly percentage of men and ships who dared to enter would never return, and yet year after year the little army of invasion has cheerfully gone forth. Spring sees a fleet of ships zigzagging their slow, buffeting way through the ice pack, and the midnight sun looks down upon the season's aftermath—here a phantom ship drifting aimlessly in the pack, and there a line of tiny black dots, men they are, struggling over the ice, half starved, half dead with cold and thirst, praying frantically for deliverance.

Why do they go?

I put the question to a grizzled old whaler, who at the age of seventy-four still listened to that strange call of the north and eagerly accepted a petty place on a boat which he once commanded, put it to him hopefully and got a reply that shattered all ideas of the romantic: "Why," said he simply, "I went after whales."

Then I happened on a younger man, one of education and imagination, and asked him.

"Well," said he, "I went whaling for my health's sake. Sort of fatalistic ides it was. My doctor said: 'You'll either be killed or come back cured.'

"That was my excuse. Now, I can tell you of some others.

"In our crew there was an Englishman, who, we learned afterward, had been valet to a rich old nabob in Australia. This man murdered his employer and fled with $10,000 in gold. He was hard pressed by the police and literally encircled the globe in his efforts to shake off pursuit. In San Francisco he tried to hide in the Chinese underworld, and failing in this he shipped with us for the Arctic. Can't beat it as a hiding place, you know.

"We had many such characters there in my day, hardened criminals, outlaws, Hooligans, and in consequence mutinies were common.

"Well, there's one type of man and his reason. Now, take your professional whaler, your leathery faced, hard fisted old New Bedford captain and his able seamen. They go for oil and bone; that's all. Talk to them all day long and you'd get no other answer from them (I had found this true); they literally think in barrels of oil and pounds of bone. That's their livelihood.

As Primal Savagery.

"Then your explorer, naturalist, scientist, hunter—well, they go for personal glory. I take it, and I think you'll find this true. So, after all, the voyagers of the Arctic are only stirred by the same vital impulses as we of New York, who take daily chances with street cars in order to follow our quest of the unattainable. That is the lure of the Arctic as I interpret it.

"Still," he added thoughtfully, "it's a terrible, savage world, this Arctic world;" and then, as we looked out from a skyscraper window upon the rushing commerce of the harbor, and while the orderly drone of a big business office sounded in the background he told me a tale that smacked of primal savagery.

One roaring day, as his ship was tearing through the drift ice off Cape Navarin—a breathless day, when there were two ice pilots in the crow's nest, a third on the bowsprit and the entire crew on deck ready to wear or tack ship at a moment's warning—the captain made out a thin column of smoke at a point on the barren Siberian shore, and the binoculars revealed a waving signal and, perhaps, a man, who ran frantically back and forth, and waved his arms.

"Castaway," said the captain, laconically, and turned his attention to the ship. There was no possible way of reaching the shore, and with that point settled their minds returned to their own imminent danger—all save the mind of the young passenger to whom the strange sights of the Arctic were new. He could not blot from his memory the picture of that helpless human on the bleak shore of a desert land.

Some months later, while at anchor in the Behring sea, the ship was visited by natives, who came out in their kyaks to trade. One of them, an old deerman, tendered a skin-covered packet with much ceremony and demanded tobacco in immediate exchange.

Upon opening the packet they found inside a square willow board with letters rudely carved on each side, and after some study, they made out the following:

"'1887. J. B. V. Bk. Nap. Tobacco give.

S. w. c. Nap. M. 10. Help come.'

"I figured," said my narrator, Mr. H. S. Aldrich, "that the letters of the lower line meant 'Ten miles southwest of Cape Navarin,' and since this was the point at which we had sighted the castaway it was undoubtedly a call for help from the poor fellow. He had given it to the native to deliver to the first ship that could be reached, promising, as the words in the first line indicated, that the bearer would receive tobacco in exchange.

"The letters 'Bk. Nap.' I could not understand, until suddenly the skipper called out: 'Jehosophat! That must mean the "Bark Napoleon," Captain Sam Smith, wrecked in 1887, two years ago! They took to the boats and only fourteen were rescued, Captain Sam among 'em. Two boats were never heard from. This fellow must be the only survivor.'

Their Terrible Experience.

"This explanation of the skipper's left only the initials 'J. B. V.' unaccounted for. This evidently was the castaway's name and so we afterwards learned it was—James B. Vincent, of Edgartown, Mass., the boat steerer, or ice pilot, of the ill-fated bark.

"We lost no time in imparting the news to every ship in the whaling fleet, with instructions to get in touch, if possible, with the revenue cutter Bear, under Captain Healy, then patrolling the Behring sea.

"Captain Healy finally got the message and rescued Vincent. Later I met him and also Captain Smith and got their stories from their own lips. Both are chiefly remarkable for their brevity. But the imagination can partly picture their terrible experiences, and could you have met Vincent you would realize easily what a horrible experience he had undergone.

"Said Captain Sam: 'There was a terrible blow on May 5 and we hove to the ship, being unable to keep a stitch of canvas on her. Two days later we stove on a sharp floe and the men came out of the foc'sle, saying the ship was full of water and sinking fast.

"'I kept her near the edge of the ice so that we could clear away the boats. Ten minutes after we got them lowered and were into them the ship went down. As she sank I cut away the main royal to use as a tent. There were thirty-six all told in the crew and an equal number got into each of the four boats.

"'That night we lay around in the ice. There was a terrible gale and frequent snow squalls, but be managed to hang together. Next day we got clear of the ice and worked northeast toward land, but that night the gale came up, with more snow squalls, so had that we got separated. Next morning I could not see another boat.

"'For two days we drifted about in the ice, till the men fell to the bottom of the boat, and I tied to a big ice floe and got my first sleep. When I awoke I found one man dead and the rest helpless. We were terribly frostbitten.'"

"What food did you have?"

"Only a half dozen cakes of ship's bread for nine men four days."

"Any water?"

"Just the ice, and it was very brackish. The fourth day I caught two pup seals and we drank their blood. The meat—it's like fish liver—I couldn't stomach. I'd rather die than eat it." Here, said Mr. Aldrich, Captain Sam betrayed the first signs of any emotion during his recital. The thought of that seal meat was too much for his phlegmatic calm.

Captain Sam had little more to relate. On the fifth day the boat was sighted and rescued by the ship Fleetwing. A second man died as they cut off his leg. The rest recovered. Captain Sam immediately looked about him for another job, found one as ice pilot on the ship Orca, and finished the season without further mishap.

Another boat was rescued with seven of its men alive. This made the total of fourteen rescued, and then came the ghostlike reappearance of James B. Vincent. He gave the following narrative to Mr. Aldrich:

After the four boats were scattered by the gale's fury, his boat picked up that of the third mate, and together they made desperate attempts to reach shore. But the ice pack caught them, and for four days they were without food and water. Several ate greedily of the salty ice and went insane. One of these, the mate, Rodgers, had to be lashed to the thwarts of the boat to keep him from murdering his companions. "I felled him with an oar," said Vincent calmly, "and bound him fast."

This boat also fell in with a family of seals and secured two of the pups. These they devoured, but, by Vincent's testimony, it was full thirty-six days before they reached land. Think of it! Thirty-six days of madmen, and no food.

Nine of Them Died.

"But how did you exist?"

Here Vincent shifted his eyes and then hung his head.

"We had to do it," he began, and stopped.

"What?"

"Well, you see, sir, the men died, one after another, nine in all, and when each was dead we—well, we cut the flesh from their thighs and—so we lived. It sounds inhuman," added the man slowly, "but we got like wild beasts. We never talked to each other. We snarled—and tried to live—each man for himself.

"The cold was terrible on shore, and right after the boatx landed five more men died. That left only four, and of these I was the only one able to walk. The rest were dying.

"I could not carry them, nor could I aid them any by remaining, and, anyway, it was every man for himself. So I struck out for the interior, and was picked up by native fishermen. I tried to make them understand about the others, but could not. They only saw that I was suffering and carried me home with them.

"The three men whom I left got a message through to the Russian brig Siberia, Captain Lincoln. He found them, but they were dead. Some natives met the rescuing party and tried to tell about me. 'Vincent,' they said, but Captain Lincoln thought they said 'venison' and paid no attention to them. All the time the brig was only thirteen miles from me."

For two years Vincent lived with the natives. In the summer they journeyed to the coast to fish and in winter returned to the mountains, driving the reindeer before them. It was on one of these trips that he carved and sent his message.

What an experience, and what a narrative it could be made! But Vincent told it briefly, dryly, with an almost utter absence of details. That says Mr. Aldrich, is the whaler way. They are so used to Arctic rigors—to shipwreck, starvation, freezing—that only the conclusion of an experience is of interest to them. Their grim motto of "dead whale or stove boat" tells the whole story.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Aldrich, "this experience will enlighten you as to the whaler's character.

"Off Cape Aygen we were caught in a tremendous ice pack, and for a day and a night we maneuvered ceaselessly, believing every minute would be our last. The gale was terrific, and never have I seen such a fearsome sight. Ice, ice, everywhere! Young ice and monster floes, twenty feet thick, all heaving, tossing, grinding, in an avalanche of hail and snow. It was simply a miracle that we escaped being stove. Time and again the ship shivered and shook as though it must part asunder.

"At last, with a worn out crew, we tied to leeward of a big floe and practically gave up. I was standing on deck with Captain Cogan when the lookout reported a sail to the southwest. Just a dot it was at first, but she was coming on with sails spread, and in a short time they made her out as the Eliza, a sister ship in the fleet.

"She was headed straight for us and never veered a point from her course. At first we were not alarmed, but when it was seen that a collision was inevitable, that she must hit us amidships, there was a silence all over the deck. Some of the men were on their knees, praying.

"I glanced at Captain Cogan, who stood rigid as a mast. He had a remarkably ruddy face, deep red in fact, as most whalers have, but now its color was ashen gray.

"Then a remarkable thing happened. As the ships were almost together the suction of the water between them sent the ice floe swinging slowly about till it almost intervened. The Eliza struck it a sliding blow, and veering for the first time in her headlong course she swung clear off and past our stern, with a rip and tear of rigging off both ships as she tore by.

"Afterward I interviewed both Captain Cogan and Captain Ned Kelley of the Eliza and was interested to note that at the crucial moment each was calmly figuring out just what orders they would give after the collision; had even their minds made up as to every detail of lowering and equipping the small boats, and, as Captain Ned averred, he even wrote mentally a letter to the owners describing the accident and his part in it. Ten minutes later the incident was forgotten by every member of each crew.

"There was a comical side to the men's prayers. It is rare that a hardened old salt prays, but when he does his prayer has an intensity that is unequalled. Upon this occasion and some others they bawled in loud voices, each striving apparently to make himself heard above the others, and promising fervently to forswear henceforth every pleasure of life and make of themselves the very patterns of virtue supreme.

"The moment their trouble was over, however, there was a remarkable burst of pent-up irreverence and profanity. Never have I heard of such swearing equalled.

"But the seasoned whaling captain is prepared for any hardship, and crisis. He never gives up. Once I heard a trial over a lost ship, during which the insurance adjuster had an old captain on the rack and questioned him sharply.

"'Now,' said he, 'suppose you were on a lee shore in a gale. It was impossible to tack ship, there was no room to wear ship and you couldn't anchor. What would you do? Why, you'd simply be compelled to let the ship go ashore, wouldn't you?'

"'Nossir,' said the old captain doggedly. 'I wouldn't.' He stuck out his chest aggressively and added in a loud, determined voice: 'I'd take in the after sails, haul everything harda back and box haul her' (back her out). The absurdity of this will be apparent to a seaman. It is like lifting one's self by the foot-straps. Still, I believe the old fellow would have done it.

"They are rare characters, some of them. I enjoyed meeting them while 'gamming' (visiting) from one ship to another in the fleet.

"One day, while eight of the ships were anchored off East Cape and I was gossiping with several of the captains in the cabin of the Eliza, Captain Ned Kelley jumped up suddenly, listened intently, and said:

"'Whale! I hear 'em singin'"!

"They chaffed him a good deal about it, but I noticed that they hurried on deck and in no time at all the lookout was yelling 'Blow! blow!' and soon twenty-three boats were in hot pursuit of a big bowhead.

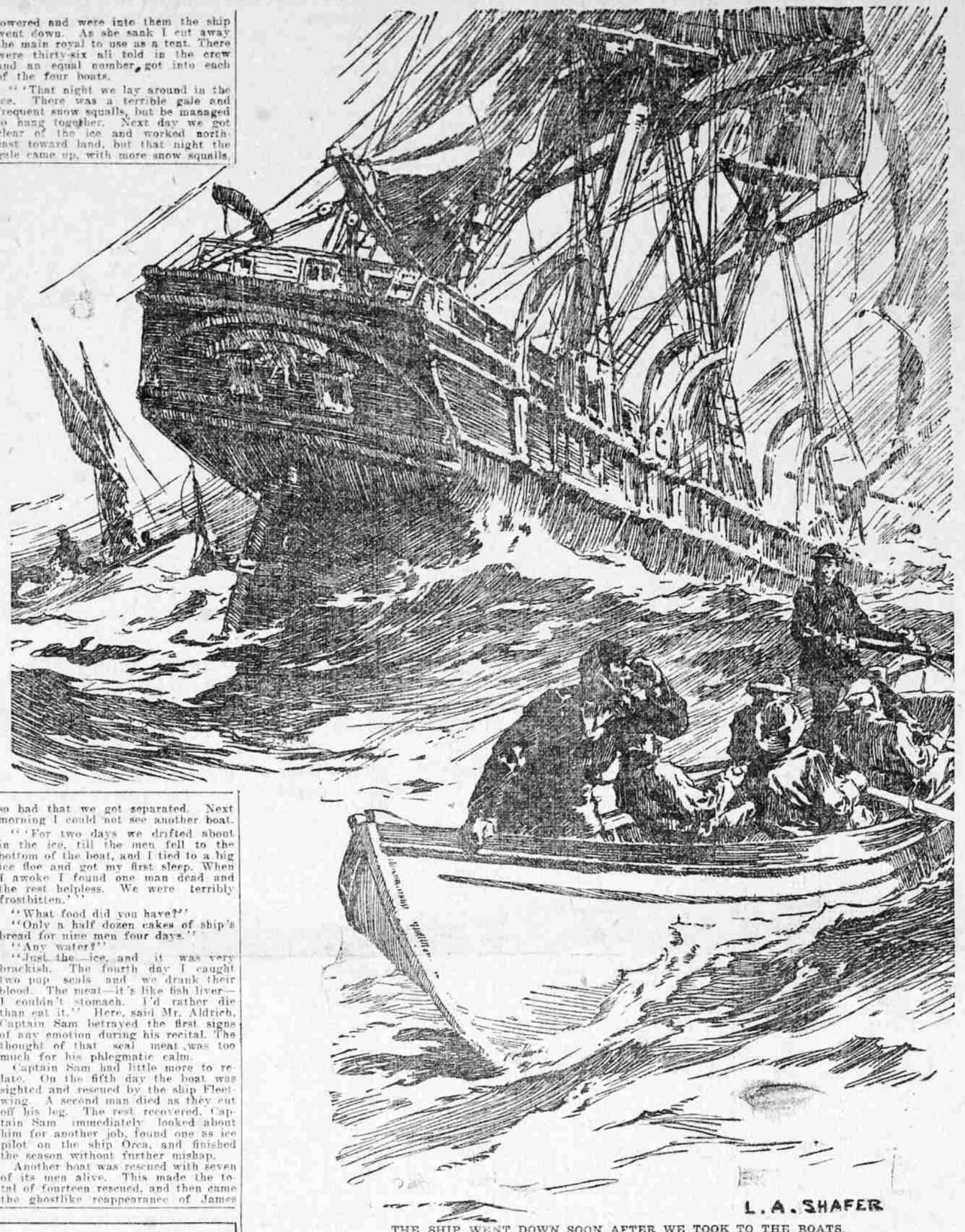
"There certainly was a 'singin' noise. I heard it myself. It sounds something like the strumming of a bass violin string, and though the captain variously ascribed it to the copper on the ship's sides, to seals and to ice, I believe it to be a signal of some kind from the whale. Walrus and seals bark under water, and humpbacks, blackfish, devilfish sing; why not whales? Certain it is that one wounded whale can notify others in some secret way of his predicament, even when they are three or four miles distant.

"And now just one more story about Captain Ned Kelley.

"One day after he had finished a tale of a mutiny, during which a San Francisco hoodlum shot repeatedly at him till the captain's better aim killed the miscreant, I asked him in all seriousness: 'Captain Ned, did you ever pray?'

"'Once,' said he simply. 'That is, I tried almighty hard to. It was when the Eliza was bearing down on the Young Phoenix, that time off Cape Aggen. Honestly I tried, but, funny thing, I couldn't think of anything to say—of not a thing except a line of a song I heard an English sailor sing once in Manila:

"'"And she winked at Jack with her funny eye."'"



THE SHIP WENT DOWN SOON AFTER WE TOOK TO THE BOATS.